

 **Main Street**
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Matthew 25:31-46
“What Happens Last Matters Most”

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(25th Sunday After Pentecost)

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“Following Christ From City Center!”

MATTHEW 25:31-46 "WHAT HAPPENS LAST MATTERS MOST"

Titles: Climax Of 24:32-25:46, Matthew Only

Son Of Man 1) vv.31-33 INTRODUCTION: DIVISION OF SHEEP AND GOATS (ND). 24:14, 36, Solemn Scene

31 "When the Son of man comes "in *his* glory," and "all the angels *with him*," Final Arbiter, Dan. 7:13-14, Zech. 14:5

King then he will sit on *his* glorious throne. Rev. 20:4, Shared Glory, //16:27, 19:28, 24:29-31, 1 Enoch 62

32 Before him will be gathered all the nations (peoples), 24:9, 14, 26:12, 28:19, Nations /Ethne = Languages/Peoples

and he will separate them one from another, 13:49, Individuals, Messianic Shepherd Imagery

Shepherd as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, 2:6, 9:36, 26:31, Not Hard, Graze Together, Ezek. 34:17-19

33 and he will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at his left. Rev. 20:4, Honor/Dishonor Nations To Whom Missionaries Sent, How Treated?

2) vv.34-40 JUDGMENT OF BLESSING ON THE COMPASSIONATE (DD). Sentence Passed, Speech After Judgment

a) vv.34-36 The King Speaks Ultimate Blessing (6 Acts Of Compassion To Me). He Knows!

34 Then the King will say to those on his right hand, 2:2, 13-14; 21:5, Solidarity Revealed: Blessing/Inheritance

Son "Come, O blessed of my Father, 5:3, 5, 20, Corporal Works Of Mercy

inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; Prov. 8:22-31, *m. Abot* 5.6

35 1 for I was hungry and you gave *me* food, Is. 58:7ff., Lord's Prayer, Sustain Life 1-2)

2 I was thirsty and you gave *me* drink, / Prov. 22:7, Assumes Missionary Hardships

3 I was a stranger and you welcomed *me* (home), *Xenos* = Foreigner, Shelter/Belonging 3)

36 4 I was naked and you clothed *me*, / *Need Outer Garment*, Dignity, Shame 4)

5 I was sick and you visited *me*, Psalm 118:17 Midrash, Sirach 7:35, Support 5)

6 I was in prison and you came to *me*." / 10:40, Survival, Risky Identification 6)

Hardships //1 Cor. 4:9-13, 2 Cor. 11:23-29, Did. 4:1

b) vv.37-39 Questions Of The Sheep: Call Him Lord. *Righteous* = Do God's Will

37 Then the righteous will answer him, Unaware Of Christ's Presence In His Messengers

Lord "Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink? Same 6 Actions

38 And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or naked and clothe thee? What Is Criteria?

39 And when did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee?" //10:38-42

24:14, World Meets Christ Through His Disciples

a') v.40 The King Speaks Of His Hidden Presence In His Messengers.

40 And the King will answer them, //2 Baruch 72:4-6 Gentiles Judged By How Treat Israel, 28:20

"Truly, I say to you, *Least Of These* = Believers In Jesus, 10:42, 18:6, Gal. 6:10

as you did it to one of the least of these *my brethren*, you did it *to me*." Surprise! *Brethren* = Jesus' Disciples

//10:40-42, *Least Of These* Stand With The Lord

2') vv.41-45 JUDGMENT OF CURSING ON THE NON-COMPASSIONATE (DD). Judged By How Treat Christ's Ambassadors

a) vv.41-43 The King Speaks Ultimate Damnation (6 Acts Of Neglect).

41 Then he will say to those on his left hand, Neglect Of Poor Fits One For Devil's Company!

"Depart from me, you cursed, 3:8-11, 7:23, *Curse* = Only God Can Say This, Rev. 19:20; 20:7-15

into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; 13:39, 2 Ages, Angels Not Repent, Not For People

42 1 for I was hungry and you gave *me* no food, Ignored Missionaries, Missed Christ

2 I was thirsty and you gave *me* no drink, Sins Of Neglect/Omission/Not Do Good

43 3 I was a stranger and you did not welcome *me*, Presumes They Met Missionaries

4 naked and you did not clothe *me*, View From Bottom, Not Top Of Heap

5,6 sick and in prison and you did not visit *me*." Not Put Faith Into Action

Not A General Humanitarian Ethic, Christ-Centered

b) v.44 The Question Of The Goats: Call Him Lord.

44 Then they will also answer, Lost Call Him Lord, Unaware Of Christ's Presence

"Lord, when did we see thee hungry or thirsty Servant Means Service, 20:26, 23:11, 16:27

or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to thee?" 20:28, Never Saw Jesus?

How Do People Become Goats? Deny Compassion

a') v.45 The King Speaks Of His Hidden Presence In His Messengers.

45 Then he will answer them, Ultimately Only Two Kinds Of People: Compassionate/Non

"Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, Only NT Scene With Judgment Details

you did it not to *me*." 10:40, What It Means To Be Faithful, Watchful, Ready

Question = Do I Know The Heart Of God?

1') v.46 CONCLUSION: DIVISION OF RIGHTEOUS AND UNRIGHTEOUS (ND). No Universalism

46 And they will go away into eternal punishment Life Counts! Mt. Church = Oppressed, Missionary Minority, //25:30

but the righteous into eternal life." Jn. 5:29, Dan. 12:2, Last Word Is Joy/Life! Dualism Of Good/Evil Only Temporary

WHAT MATTERS LAST MATTERS MOST

“Come, O blessed of my Father.... Depart from me you cursed.”

All will hear one or the other; there will be no appeals.

M A T T H E W 2 5 : 3 1 - 4 6

In November of 1964, anarchy broke out in Belgian Congo. Assemblies of God missionary J. W. Tucker knew the risk and stayed. A mob killed him; his body was tossed in the Bomokande River.

Thirty ears later a friend, John Weidman, was back and learned how God used Tucker’s martyrdom. The Bomokande flows through the middle of the lands of the Mangbeto tribe. During a civil war, the tribe’s king appealed to Kinshasa– the nation’s capital– for help. They sent a man called *The Brigadier*, a policeman of strong stature and reputation. As it turn out, Tucker won The Brigadier to Christ two months before his martyrdom, and he was determined to reach the tribe with the message of Jesus as the only way to peace. He did his best, but found no response.

Then one day he learned of a old tribal saying from long ago, "If the blood of any man flows in the Bomokande River, you must listen to his message." It was a cultural key.¹ The king assembled the elders. The Brigadier began:

"Some time ago a man was killed and thrown in your river. The crocodiles ate him; his blood flowed. Before he died, he left me a message. The message of God's Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, who came to this world to save sinners. He died for the sins of the world; He died for mine. I received the message; it changed my life."

As he preached, the Spirit descended; people fell to their knees and cried out. Through a providentially preserved proverb, the gospel made its way inside the world

¹ The classic treatment of cultural keys is Don Richardson, *Eternity in their Hearts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker 2014).

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view of the Mangbeto. Thousands have since come to faith and churches planted as a result of the message of Jesus from the man whose blood flowed in the river.²

Someone has cynically defined history as *just one darn thing after another*. It seems that way because we're buried in it and can't see past our noses, but history is not aimless, not a jumble of unrelated events. According to the big picture of our Christian faith, history has a goal; it's headed somewhere; it's *teleological*— as the theologians say. It's moving along the tracks from Creation to Consummation and from Eden towards Eternity. It travels through the valley of the shadow of death and into life beyond life in the kingdom of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. This why so many great songs speak about the gospel as a train, as in the spiritual:

“The gospel train’s a-comin, I hear it just at hand.
I hear the car wheels rumblin’, And rollin’ through the land.
Get on board, little children, get on board.
Get on board, little children, There’s room for many-a-more.”³

In his 1966 album *Gospel Train* Hank Snow sang of the requirements of the ticket:

“This train don't carry gamblers,
no pickpockets nor the hobo rambler.
This train don't carry no gamblers, this train.”

Thirty-seven years later South Carolina’s deep-voiced Josh Turner picked up the rail imagery and sang of a dark ride in the wrong direction:

“There's a long black train, comin’ down the line
Feeding off the souls that are lost and cryin’
Rails of sin, only evil remains
Watch out brother for that long Black Train.”⁴

History is a one way ticket, and only from the end of the line will its long

² PreachingToday.com search under Matthew 25:1-30.

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Gospel_Train

⁴ [Www.hit-country-music-lyrics.com/josh-turner-long](http://www.hit-country-music-lyrics.com/josh-turner-long).

agonies make sense and its circuitous route be fully traced. The meaning of my life and yours will not be plain till we pull into the last stop and join all the travelers in the piercing light of Jesus Christ. All God has done will be revealed; all we have done and not done in response to that grace will be made plain, all secrets told and the verdicts pronounced. And of this scene we have a preview in the text before us.

As Christians we believe that the deepest layer of meaning is not the textbook history of kings and nations, of empires and battles, of scientific discoveries and technological achievements but the story of Christian missions. It is Jesus who stands just the other side of the door that swings open into the eternity of God’s kingdom, and the red thread that runs through history is the tale of how his life with all its benefits made its way into every piece of the human mosaic to stunning effect. And at the end of the history of missions will come the great division: on the right hand and the left; sheep here, goats there, the blessed and the cursed, those who lives were made loving and those who hearts were hardened to the call of compassion. The one go away, as Matthew states without a blink, “into eternal punishment” but the righteous “into eternal life.” So the story ends, and then begins anew, as the Nicene Creed anticipates in its last great line of anticipation, “We look for resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.”⁵

For all the choices we make along the way, there are none that do not eventually bring us to one of two destinations.⁶ There is no third alternative, no neutral ground in the universe. Those who do not wish to live in the kingdom of the Father and the Son and the Spirit, who define themselves by something less than the compassion shown in Jesus, will be afforded accommodations never designed for human beings, and in that sense *permanently unnatural*. What is God to do with those who over the course of life have become fit company for the devil and his angels, who resist the call to become a new person in Christ? Verse 41 is the answer, “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire *prepared for the devil and his*

⁵ *U.M. Hymnal*, No. 880.

⁶ Peter Kreeft, *Fundamentals of the Faith* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 1988), 157. For two studies on hell, see Peter Toon, *Heaven and Hell* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 1986); *The Nature of Hell* (London: Evangelical Alliance, 2000); on heaven, see Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Paradise Mislaid* (New York, NY: Oxford, 2006). For a recent treatment by a Christian philosopher, see Jerry L. Walls, *Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2015).

angels.” Not for men and women but for angels who rebelled against God face to face. Hell is an alien environment for human beings, like a fish out of water.

What we do with God’s gift of Jesus and those who bear his news to us matters greatly and matters finally. J.W. Tucker did not throw his life away; he invested it in the hidden purposes of God and did so in trust. His blood was the seed of a church. A man who became crocodile food became a bridge to Jesus for thousands.

TURNING TO THE TEXT

1) vv.31-33 The Glorious Arrival Of The Son Of Man.

I have been and want to go again because it so sobered me. I speak of the *Archangel Cathedral* inside the Kremlin. The aroma of bees wax candles and incense permeates the walls. At floor level in front of the high screen of icons are the sarcophagi of Russian nobility, oversized princes and princesses all encased in bronze. The son of Ivan the Terrible is there. But it was not until I turned and faced the back of the church that I saw it. On the rear Western wall is a huge fresco of the Last Judgment.⁷ Christ on his glorious throne, some going up into light, others down into dark fires. There I stood amidst the earthly remains of Tzarist royalty and gazed up at the Last Judgment. Then it hit me: I will be there, and so will Ivan and Stalin and Putin and Elvis and Earnhardt and Mickey Mantle and my Grandmother Lida and my old friend Mike Corbett who died too young. All will be assembled on the same level, and Jesus will be vindicated before all the world. This is the warning and promise of his resurrection. What difference would it make if our back wall had such an awesome graphic? If not for you, at least to remind me I preach to people who will appear in the painting. There will be no observers, only participants.

It’s not that Jesus has anything against goats. In the life of Nazareth, separating goats and sheep was a common sight. Goats don’t have the same wooly coat as sheep and need greater protection at night when it’s cold. During the day they graze together, and in the evening are separated. The point of the metaphor is that it’s not hard to tell one from the other, so the separation is a clean one. At the end it will not be hard for Jesus to tell who belongs to him and who doesn’t. We are together in life, but separated at the end by the only one who has the moral authority and insight to do so, verse 32: “...and *he* will separate them one from another, as a shepherd

⁷ www.kreml.ru/en/main/museums/archangel/fresco/Strashniy_sud/

separates the sheep from the goats, and *he* will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at his left.” What happened at the end of the day is a window into the end of days. This is why the church has historically shown great reserve about speculating who might be in hell. Why? First because it’s not our job to do the separating; it is *Jesus*’ alone, and it’s still future. It hasn’t happened yet, so there’s still time to give up being a goat and follow the Good Shepherd! But be assured; there will be many surprises at history’s most dramatic moment.

But before he invokes the image of the shepherd and the separation as a window into ultimates, Matthew awes us with a vision of the returning glory of the risen Jesus. What was hidden in history will be unveiled at its end, and that is that Jesus fully shares the glory of God as God the Son. The Shepherd is also the King and the glorious Son of Man. Jesus is the one appointed to bear the weight of judgment over all the nations and over every soul that came into existence.

People love pageantry and big shows, whether it’s the American excess of a Super Bowl half-time or the reserved British pomp of a royal wedding, the elaborate ceremony of a Papal Mass in Rome or the precision of the guards at the tomb of the Unknowns in Arlington. People wait in line and pay big bucks to attend spectacles, but at this biggest of all gatherings everyone will be in attendance by virtue of being a man or woman stamped in God’s image, verse 31: “Before him will be gathered *all the nations*, all the languages, all the tribes of the earth, all who every lived.”

Mohammed will be there- quaking because he misread and misrepresented the one God and gave cover for movements like ISIS.⁸ Hitler and Himmler will be there, moustaches twitching in horror over his crimes. President Barak Obama and Prime Ministers David Cameron and Francois Hollande will know how fleeting was their leadership. Henry VIII and all his wives will see how ephemeral were their schemes and plots. All the big names of the history will be present- the thugs and the heroes, and all the little ones whose names were never remembered. Those whose graves were national monuments and those whose final resting place remains unmarked stand side by side. All the aborted whose human journey was cut short will be there, all still-borns who never saw day light, all new borns who lived only a short while. Every soul will be present, because from conception onwards we are distinctly human

⁸ For a searing critique of Muhammed, the Koran, and how ISIS faithfully embodies many of his and its teachings, see Craig A. Evans, Jeremiah J. Johnson, *Jesus and the Jihadis: Confronting the Rage of Isis* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny, 2015).

with amazing potential, even if unrealized in this life. Farther than the eye can see we will stretch- a great multitude, and yet each will be an audience of one before the throne of King Jesus, the glory of God shining through his five open wounds. It's a time when to say *everyone was there* will not be an exaggeration; it is the final reunion of whole human family across the whole of time before the great separation. And in that moment only one question matters, "How did I respond to the Christ-shaped grace of God which came to me and followed me all my days? Did I respond from the heart, and did it show?"

The flow of history will be interrupted by the sudden appearing of Jesus as heaven opens to invade earth with all the army of faithful angels, verse 31: "When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the peoples...." It was in 1861 when the rattle of sabers first echoed across a divided Union that Julia Ward Howe meditated on this verse and penned the first stanza of her grand lament of judgment:

"Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord:
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;
He has loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible, swift sword:
His truth is marching on."⁹

This is our future, as the Creed announces, "He shall come again to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom shall have no end."¹⁰ This is no fairy tale; this is the final meaning of Jesus' life and death and resurrection, that one day his shall be the only rule, and that what does not conform to him will be exposed and eliminated. God the Father is ruthless about only one thing, that Jesus shall get the fully glory due him- with me, without me, in spite of me.

2, 2', 1') vv.34-46 Division And Reasons.

In a way not yet understood, the next two scenes- first in a word to the blessed and secondly a word to the cursed- presume that Jesus made himself available to every human being. The word *me* is repeated no less than thirteen times in verses 34 through 45: "gave *me* food, gave *me* drink.... gave *me* no food, gave *me* no drink....

⁹ *U.M. Hymnal*, No. 717.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, No 880.

you did it to *me*.... you did it not to *me*.” How this can be is a matter of speculation; the scene before us does not so much argue for as presume it. This much is clear: God’s judgments are just; Jesus is the standard; nothing is arbitrary, and there is no favoritism because God is impartial.¹¹ Everyone will have dealt with him— even if in disguise, and in those encounters futures are shaped.

In the first scene all are gathered before the King, and in the second a grand aisle appears down the middle dividing the peoples into two groupings, one at the traditional place of honor- the right hand of the throne, others in the place of dishonor- the king’s left hand.

To the group on the right the King addresses an invitation, “Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world...” God has predestined and decreed from the act of creation- *from the laying of the foundations of the world* - that those who respond to his grace with faith should have a future, and that all those who resist his grace with the stubbornness of unbelief should have no future. God sets the terms, and over time we sort ourselves out according to this criteria. No one is born lost against their will, and none are born saved against their will. It’s not that one is saved and one lost from the beginning. Along the way we may cooperate with God or resist, and that is what shapes our destiny. We do not save ourselves, but neither does God save us apart from our heartfelt and active assent which he enables but does not coerce.¹² Life is a long proving ground and a school of hard knocks with help always only a prayer away.

It is interesting that the phrase *prepared for you from the foundations of the world* in verse 35 is not used in the parallel scene of judgment in verse 41. What is found there is a crucial variation, *prepared for the devil and his angels*.

One of the great blessings of being human and not an angel is that angels do not have the same freedom we do. By God’s grace we are given the capacity to

¹¹ Romans 2:11.

¹² On the current critique of Calvinism by Arminians, see Roger Olson, *Against Calvinism* (Downer’s Grove, ILL: IVP, 2011); Jerry L. Walls, Joseph R. Dongell, *Why I Am Not A Calvinist* (Downer’s Grove, ILL: IVP, 2004); Don Thorsen, *Calvin vs. Wesley: Bringing Belief In Line With Practice* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 2013).

repent, to turn back to God after having turned away.¹³ But that is not true of fallen angels who- having joined the Great Rebellion- are now locked in and frozen in place, no second chances. Angels have only a forward gear, not a reverse as we do. Over time- it seems- it is possible to become so thoroughly resistant to the constant overtures of God’s grace that we find ourselves the companions of evil spirits or fallen angels. It is possible over the course of a life to become less than a fully human being precisely because the special capacity to repent has been so completely ignored, mainly for reasons of pride. I’ve gone my own way and refuse to do an about-face.¹⁴ The wide road of sin is so familiar that the narrow road back to God and a new life seems strange and foreign. I march into the cold with sunlight shining on my back. I put my hands over my ears to shut out the voice of God’s call. I close my eyes to the light. I would rather die than admit my wrongs. Such is the ugly, damning power of distorted human freedom. Dr. Peter Kreeft writes:

“The... image of demons gleefully poking pitchforks into unrepentant posteriors misses the point of the biblical image.... Fire *destroys*. *Gehenna*, the word Jesus used for hell, was the valley outside Jerusalem that the Jews used for the... burning of garbage because it had been desecrated by heathen tribes who used it for human sacrifice. In hell you make an eternal ash of yourself. Hell is not eternal life with torture but something far worse: eternal dying. What goes to hell, said C.S. Lewis, is ‘not a man, but remains.’”¹⁵

In Jesus our broken humanity is put back on the path to restoration; we are brought into the hospital of the great healer for divine therapy, joined to the body of Christ in baptism and given the heavenly medicine of communion. We become more

¹³ The UM Articles of Religion, Article XII: Of Sin After Justification, “Not every sin willingly committed after justification is the sin against the Holy Ghost, and unpardonable. Wherefore, the grant of repentance is not to be denied to such as fall into sin after justification. After we have received the Holy Ghost, we may depart from grace given, and fall into sin, and, by the grace of God, rise again and amend our lives. And therefore they are to be condemned who say they can no more sin as long as they live here; or deny the place of forgiveness to such as truly repent” (*BOD 2012*: 64).

¹⁴ On repentance (a change of mind and direction) as a biblical metaphors for conversion, see Charles H. Talbert, *Romans* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), 81.

¹⁵ www.peterkreeft.com/topics/hell.

of who we were created to be and in the end experience the fullness of resurrection life in the communion of the Holy Trinity. But this is not something God requires of any; it's an offer that may be refused, but not without consequences, and that is to become less and less genuinely human, less solid and substantial, more a caricature and cartoon than a genuine character full of drama and delight.

From time to time I run into some older, truly despicable characters. Young sinners can be more easily tolerated than old ones because they are not so fixed in their dispositions. Selfish, cruel, brutes who guzzle liquor and abuse their spouses. There is about them the smell of something gone sour and rancid, a soul that stinks. They rail at good and holy things and love to suck others into their slime. They are morally unclean, defiled, full of the bitterness and unforgiveness that is the favorite food of demons. I have left their living rooms and hospital rooms feeling I needed to be disinfected. Not just broken people but souls grown ugly. And when you speak of Jesus to them, they appear to be behind a glass wall with your words bouncing off.

What happened? How did they get this way? Not an occasional bad decision or flagrant sin but by turning away over and over from God's call to follow Jesus Christ in order to become a new kind of person, a soul of compassion and wisdom. Beneath their bluster and bravado is really not much at all. Like a house full of termites, there's a shell that when pressed crumbles to dust. This is the awful price of freedom misused over the course of a life. And if you say, "Are you aware of the danger you're in?" as I sometimes summon up the courage to ask, they scoff, "No preacher's gonna tell me how to live I tried Jesus, and he didn't work for me."

"Well, you didn't try him long enough!"

Sin and evil are terribly real within the bubble of time and history. They are corrosive of our created humanity, but they are only temporary. There is no ultimate dualism, no eternal yin and yang, no unending standoff of competing forces, no God and Satan as equals glaring at one another across the great divide, each with his kingdom and loyalists intact. What we have is a time bound ethical dualism, not- as the philosophers say, an *ontological* dualism. Evil is not basic to creation which from the beginning is pronounced *good* and then *very good* when the first pair was created. Eden was here before the fall. Sin and evil and death are systemic infections; they are not health. They are alien and parasitic, having no independent life of their own. They do not create, only distort. They are the dark side of freedom let loose for a season, but they do not have the last word or a permanent place. They will be removed and the deep goodness of creation fully restored. Thus the last word of the

scene before us is not death and destruction but life everlasting, verse 46: “And they (the intruders and their companions) will *go away* into eternal punishment (into the unreality of those who know not God), but the righteous into eternal life.” They simply *go away*. And when the causes of offense, both demonic and human are removed, this world and we along with it will erupt with new life under the touch and rule of the risen Jesus. Eternal life in a healed creation full of resurrection bodies.

Classic Christian teaching is that all have one of two ends and that the grace and love of God are calling us to choose the path of life which passes through the doorway of Jesus Christ. Our teaching on this matter is not a matter of speculation, no matter how much it has been recently ignored. It is spelled out in our *Confession of Faith*, Article XII, titled “The Judgment and the Future State.” It is a brief doctrinal paraphrase of the text before us this Sunday:

“We believe all men (and women) stand under the righteous judgment of Jesus Christ, both now and in the last day. We believe in the resurrection of the dead; the righteous to life eternal and the wicked to endless condemnation.”¹⁶

But not only are we given the two possible ends of human life, the one happy, the other a horror, we are also given the criterion of judgment ahead of time. The six corporal— meaning *bodily*— works of mercy: feeding the hungry and giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming the outsider and clothing the nearly naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned, fall into three groups of two:

- 1) immediate survival needs (food and water),
- 2) longer term social needs (welcome and dignity), and
- 3) special circumstances that tend to isolate (sickness and incarceration).

As perhaps no passage in the Bible, Matthew’s Last Judgment has been used to provoke a grand, humanitarian, Christian ethic. It is the people who do such things, without looking for merit, who demonstrate they already know the love of God and are already card-carrying citizens of the coming kingdom. They live in the present by the power of the future and so are— literally— *ahead of the times*.

¹⁶ *The U.M. Book of Discipline 2012*: 74. For John Wesley’s Sermon on the issue, see *The Great Assize* (www.gbgm-umc.org/UMHISTORY/wesley/sermons/serm-015).

These verses are without a doubt the driving cause behind more worldwide works of mercy than anything ever written. Just to catalog the work of nuns in hospitals all over the world would be an impossible task, and no one has embodied this reading of this text better than Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who was sometimes challenged about the long-term effects of her humanitarian ministry. She was once asked, "Why give people fish to eat instead of teaching them how to fish?"

Her response was quick, "But my people can't even stand. They're sick, crippled, demented. When I have given them fish to eat and they can stand, I'll turn them over and you give them the rod to catch the fish."

She was quick to emphasize— however— that she gave people more than fish. Equally important was that which came from the heart, love and joy. The poor, she insisted, deserve more than just service and dedication: "If our actions are just useful actions that give no joy to the people, our poor people would never be able to rise up to the call which we want them to hear, the call to come closer to God. We want to make them feel they are loved."¹⁷

But good as it is, this is not the most basic meaning. Earlier in Matthew we are informed that Jesus fully identifies with those he sends out in mission. In chapter 10, verses 40 through 42, he previews the Last Judgment. Listen for the echoes:

“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple- truly I will tell you, none of these shall lose their reward.:

The six categories of the hungry and thirsty, the stranger and poorly clad, the ill and imprisoned are not in the first case the wretched of the earth; they are missionaries sent out by churches like that of Matthew, and when they are loved and their message received, it is Jesus who is loved and received: *gave me food, gave me drink, welcomed me, clothed me, visited me, came to me*. Jesus so identifies with his ambassadors that to aid them is to aid him.

We are not saved by our good works of mercy; we are saved by receiving the

¹⁷ Ruth A. Tucker, "Mother Teresa," *Christian History* (Issue 65, Vol. 19:1), 22.

good news of Jesus Christ in trust, which is occasionally preached by angels and most often by humble missionaries of all kinds. Jesus hides himself in those who answer his call to spread the Word. To reject them is to reject him; and if you reject him and do it over and over and over, then what hope is there if you refused the best medicine God had to give? But once Jesus is welcomed, then the passage at a second level can open up into the mercy of good works as the fruit of faith. The resources God gives to Christian people are the abundance out of which the works of mercy are to be done across the street and around the world.

The turning point of the Last Judgment is *sight*. *When did we see thee?* is the question everyone asks. Every time we ignore the tug of compassion for the prudence of non-involvement and personal convenience, we become a little less heavenly and a bit more diabolical. Judgment is not just at the end according the Scriptures and settled Christian teaching; it's every day and every minute of every hour. Jesus' judgment is simple: he tells the truth about he, he shows before all what we have in fact become over a lifetime. Sheep and goats are not hard to distinguish for the One who sees the heart and know the whole of life. Only he has authority to make the separation, not any of us. None will be rejected who give him half a chance. Just stop saying No; let him work!

Please do not turn away from needs you are presented with, and if you cannot help in a material way, take time to speak with the person and pray with them. At a minimum, the poor and lost have a right to our courtesy and time. And in a day of so many programs and agencies, Christians are not let off the hook from costly, personal involvement with the needy of all types. Jesus kept using the pronouns *you* and *me*, meaning face-to-face, not just through agencies, even good ones. And if you are too busy to be interrupted by what you see, you are too busy for Jesus, who— in my reading of his four biographies— made an art of turning interruptions into opportunities. Our culture will find hope not from grand plans and strategies for social change but by a rising tide of personal, face-to-face, long term, messy and difficult engagement between believers and those persons who cross our path.

CONCLUSION

A professor tells of being invited to speak at a military base one December and there meeting a soldier named Ralph who'd been sent to meet him at the airport. As they walked the concourse, Ralph kept disappearing. Once to help an older woman whose suitcase fell open. Once to lift two toddlers up to where they could see Santa Claus,

again to give directions. And each time he came back with a smile.

"Where did you learn that?" the professor asked.

"What?" Ralph said.

"Where did you learn to live like that?"

"Oh," he said, "during the war, I guess." He then told how his job in Vietnam was to clear mine fields and how he watched his friends blow up one after another.

"I learned to live between steps," he said. "I never knew whether the next would be my last, so I learned to get everything I could out of the moment between when I picked up my foot and when I put it down again. Every step I took was a whole new world, and I guess I've been that way ever since."

"The abundance of our lives," says Barbara Brown, "is not determined by how *long* we live, but by how *well*..."¹⁸ And how well we live is determined by whether or not we learn to see through the eyes of Jesus because we risked becoming his followers.

What you do with your stuff is important; it indicates priorities and what you love. But there's an even more basic question, Where will you invest your life? Jesus has plans for you, and whether you see that as a threat or opportunity makes all the difference.

¹⁸ PreachingToday.com search under Mt. 25:31-46.
